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ABSTRACT

A study of the performance of the nation's campus press is presented. The point is made that in terms of content, the student press has come of age. The specific question studied is: How did the campus press perform in its coverage of the campus disorders of May 1970?Content and administrator and student staff attitudes were scrutinized. A four-member panel sifted all items dealing with the May disorders and divided them into two major categories. It was found that a major proportion of the space devoted the May disorders coverage dealt with local news of campus disorders. Another result of the study was that of the 45 sources interviewed, 69% felt favorably toward the newspaper's performance in the coverage of the disorders. Nearly all of the newspapers staff responding to an open-ended questionnaire felt that the newspaper had performed very well in its coverage. One implication of the study is that campus press performed, in its failure to analyze news thoroughly, is echoing the performance of the commercial press and therefore, journalism education must be redirected. (CK)

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Campus Press Performance in Coverage of Disorders

By Kenneth Starck

► It is odd that apparently so few systematic studies have been reported of the performance of the nation's campus press. The reasons may be obvious. The great diversity of circumstances in which this press operates, as noted by Stewart and Atkins,[1] tends to reduce generalization of findings, possibly discouraging some investigators. Another reason may be that, as with the commercial press, staffs become so preoccupied with production that time is not allotted for evaluation of the product. Or, as suggested by Bornholdt,[2] it may be simply that the content of the campus press is not very serious and, thus, is not to be taken seriously.

In terms of content, the campus press would seem to have come of journalistic age. The campus press has become concerned with societal issues and frequently has been as active as its professional counterparts in covering complex and controversial stories.[3] At the same time the campus press has had to grapple with problems common to its professional colleagues—deadlines, accurate and balanced coverage, barriers to information gathering, press responsibility.

How has the campus press responded to its new challenges? On the basis of available evidence, it is not possible to provide much of an answer. One case study suggests that the press may be doing a "remarkably conscientious" job in terms of completeness and fairness of coverage.[4] The current study posed the question: How did the campus press perform in its coverage of one of the most significant stories to involve the nation's campuses—the campus disorders of May 1970?

The question was broken into three parts: 1) What amounts and kinds of content appeared during the May disorder? 2) What did information sources, such as university officials, student leaders, law enforcement officials, etc., think about the coverage? 3) How did student staffers feel about their performance, and what problems did they encounter in carrying out their assignments? Answers came through a case study utilizing content analysis and interviews.[5]

The Setting

The newspaper is a five-times-a-week tabloid that serves a campus with an enrollment of nearly 25,000. In the Stewart and Atkins analysis, the newspaper is one among only seven from 46 institutions in which the journalism unit exercises primary control of the newspaper.[6] The core newsroom staff consists of about two dozen students employed part-time, with three faculty members in supervisory positions. The turmoil of May 1970, did not catch the staff unprepared. Several months of sporadic campus disturbances, keying on opposition to a federally-funded Center for Vietnamese Studies, had prompted formulation of a plan for coverage of

[1] Guy H. Stewart and Paul A. Atkins, "J-schools work more closely with commercial newspapers, sever ties with campus press," *The Journalism Educator*, 25:2-5 (Fall 1970).

[2] John N. Bornholdt Jr., "Should the Student Press Be More Serious?" JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 43:560-2 (Autumn 1966).

[3] E.g. G. Norman Van Tubergen, "The Student Press and Campus Unrest," JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 47:368-72 (Summer 1970); Earl L. Conn, "The Student Newspaper-Magazine: Next Evolution of the College Press," *College Press Review*, Vol. 9 (Fall 1969), pp. 5-6.

[4] Van Tubergen, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

[5] This investigation, prompted shortly after Southern Illinois University had ended the Spring 1970 quarter six weeks prematurely, was supervised by a four-member faculty committee—none of whom was directly associated with the production of the newspaper involved. The newspaper was the *Daily Egyptian* published at SIU.

[6] Stewart and Atkins, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

► Dr. Starck, associate professor in the University of South Carolina College of Journalism, prepared this report while an assistant professor in the Southern Illinois School of Journalism. He acknowledges the contributions of his former colleagues, Dr. Gerald L. Grotta, William M. Harmon, Harry L. Nix Jr. and Dr. Harry W. Stonecipher; and F. L. Masha, doctoral student in journalism.

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possible larger, more serious outbreaks. Two teams, each consisting of two reporters and a photographer, were assigned to cover news wherever it might occur. They were supported by individual reporters stationed at strategic posts, such as the police station and various housing areas. An inside-newsroom staff gathered and verified information by telephone and took calls from reporters. All rough copy was funneled to a single staffer who handled the writing.

Before ceasiing publication for the quarter, the staff during May produced nine editions—the last dated May 15—which told of: a locally aborted Rock Fest, the presidential announcement to send American troops into Cambodia, the deaths of four students at Kent State, a student boycott of classes, day and night rampages resulting in an estimated $100,000 damage to local businesses and some $30,000 damage to campus buildings, four nights of 7:30 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew throughout the city, the occupation of the city and campus by 1,200 National Guardsmen, the arrests of nearly 500 persons and, finally, closure of the university. The study encompassed the nine May editions between President Nixon's announcement about Cambodia and cessation of publication.

Analysis of Content

Procedure. A four-member panel, including an undergraduate and two graduate students, sifted all items dealing with the May disorders and placed each item in one of two major categories: 1) underlying and related issues, e.g., Kent State incident, Cambodia invasion, etc., and 2) Campus disorders, e.g., demonstrations and rallies at campuses, closure of universities, etc. Each of these two categories then was divided into: local and non-local; and these then were subcategorized as to type of item, e.g., news/editorial, photos and illustrations, etc. Seven sub-categories emerged for each of the two main categories (Table 1).

TABLE 1

Percentage of Space Devoted to Specific Kinds of Items in Relation to Total Disorder-Related Content for the Newspaper's Nine Editions

Categories of Content	Col. In.	%
Underlying/related Issues		
Non-Local		
Photos/Illustrations	181	5.4
News/Editorial	412	12.3
Local		
News	283	8.4
Feature/Interpretative	53	1.6
Editorials	40	1.2
Letters to the Editor	180	5.4
Photos/Illustrations	34	1.0
Campus Disorders		
Non-Local		
Photos/Illustrations	10	0.3
News/Editorial	262	7.8
Local		
News	1378	41.1
Feature/Interpretative	—	—
Editorials	12	0.4
Letters to the Editor	99	3.0
Photos/Illustrations	407	12.1
Total	3351	100.0

Results. A major proportion of the space devoted to the May disorders coverage dealt with local news of campus disorders. This category comprised 41.1% of all the space devoted to the disorders in the nine editions. Local news for both campus disorders and underlying and related issues accounted for 49.5% of all the total space devoted to the disorders in all of the nine editions.

Non-local news/editorial content concerning underlying and related issues amounted to 412 column inches, or 12.3% of all space devoted to the disorders. News/editorial content for both non-local campus disorders and non-local underlying/related issues took up 20.1% of the space devoted to the disorders.

There seemed to be a dearth of local editorials. Only 1.6% (or, 4 in number) of the total space devoted to the disorders was occupied by local editorials; of this space, only 0.4%—a single editorial—dealt with local campus disorders. Features and interpretative reports occupied as little space as editorials (1.6%). There were no feature or interpretative items concerning local campus disorders. A total of 8.4% of the space devoted to disorders coverage was devoted to letters to the editor.

The large amount of space devoted to local news of campus disorders suggests the newspaper did a thorough and even comprehensive job of covering news happenings related to local campus disorders. At least in relation to all other kinds of content, news held a substantial margin in terms of total space.

The skimpy space devoted to editorials and feature and interpretative material suggests a weakness in the treatment of the May disorders. These kinds of articles, it is usually believed, provide the necessary background for placing issues and events in perspective. Such backgrounding and reflection seem necessary for a reader's comprehensive and intelligent understanding of the news events.

Source Evaluation

Procedure. The content analysis yielded 68 items of local origin pertaining to the campus disorders and underlying or related issues; excluded were two which simply listed persons who were arrested for violating curfew. All persons who were information sources or were somehow referred to in the 68 articles comprised the pool of prospective respondents. A total of 75 different persons were cited in the 68 articles. Of these, 18 were mentioned in more than one article, one individual having been mentioned in 24 different articles.

[7] Sidney Siegel, *Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 75-83.

Of the 75 persons, it was possible to interview 45 (60%). Those not interviewed were either out of the state or could not be located at the time of the study. Among the 45 interviewed, 15.6% were university officials; 6.7%, law enforcement officials; 31.1%, members of the local business community; 22.2%, students; 17.8%, faculty and/or staff; and 6.6%, others. Among the 30 not interviewed were one university official, three law enforcement officials, 17 students, two others and seven unidentified.

Each respondent was asked to indicate on a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from "excellent" to "very poor" his reaction to two questions:

> Overall, what do you think of the (name of newspaper) coverage of the campus disorders during May?
> Generally speaking, what do you think of the (name of newspaper) as a campus community newspaper?

The Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the respondent's evaluation of the newspaper generally and the coverage of the disorders.[7]

Results. Of the 45 sources interviewed, 69% felt favorably toward the newspaper's performance in the coverage of the disorders. These respondents represented a diversity of town and gown. Fifty percent of those who said they felt favorably toward the newspaper's coverage were either university students, faculty members or university administrators. The other 50% were civic leaders, members of the business community, law enforcement officials, a religious leader and an ACLU official.

Of the 20% of the respondents who rated coverage of the disorders as unfavorable, 55% were from the university community; the remainder belonged to the business community. Among the 11% neutral toward the newspaper's disorders coverage were two administrative officials, a business-

man, a student and a faculty member.

In response to the second question, 60% of the sources held a favorable attitude toward the newspaper. Of these, 27% belonged to the business community, 52% belonged to the university community and 21% consisted of law enforcement officials, civic leaders and a religious leader.

Of those expressing an unfavorable attitude toward the newspaper, most were student activists (65%) and members of the business community (23%). The remaining 13% included faculty members, a university administrator and a resident fellow in an off-campus dorm.

Sixty percent of those who indicated they were neutral toward the newspaper were from the business community; 20%, law enforcement officers; and 20%, student government officials.

Only 11% of the respondents had an unfavorable attitude toward *both* the newspaper generally and its coverage of the disorders. These consisted of two students, a faculty member, a businessman and a university official.

Of the 45 respondents, 24 had *both* a favorable attitude toward the newspaper generally and its coverage of the disorders. Of these, 45% were from the university community. The rest were from outside the university community and included civic leaders, businessmen and law enforcement officials. Whereas the percentage of neutrals was the same for both questions, no single respondent was neutral to both questions. Statistically, there was no significant difference (alpha=.05) in the sources' evaluation of the newspaper generally and the coverage of the disorders.

Results indicate that those who served as information sources generally had a high opinion of the newspaper. Endorsement of the newspaper's coverage of the disorders apparently was even stronger than for the newspaper's general performance. Particularly noticeable was the tendency of some respondents who had expressed an unfavorable attitude toward the newspaper generally to indicate a favorable attitude toward its coverage of the disorders. The newspaper's favorable evaluation came from all types of respondents; similarly, those with an unfavorable attitude toward the newspaper were not limited to any particular group.

TABLE 2

Informational Source Attitudes Toward the Newspaper

	Newspaper Generally	Newspaper's Disorders Coverage
Favorable	27 (60%)	31 (69%)
Neutral	5 (11%)	5 (11%)
Unfavorable	13 (29%)	9 (20%)
N =	45	45

Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, T=133, N=24 (n.s.)

Staff Evaluation

Procedure. This phase dealt with newspaper staff reactions to such questions as problems encountered in gathering information, suggestions for improvement and evaluation of the coverage. Thirteen of 21 staff members (61.9%) responded to an open-ended questionnaire.

Results. Nearly all those responding felt the newspaper had performed very well in its coverage of the May disorders. Most felt coverage had been fair and objective, although several agreed with one reporter who stated that "interpretation of events was sadly lacking."

Most problems cited by the staffers in carrying out their assignments involved law enforcement agencies. Police often did not take the student reporters seriously and apparently just as often disregarded the staffers' press credentials. Among the suggestions for future staffs confronted with similar challenges were: acquisition of gas masks, improved means of transporting reporters and photographers, later dead-

lines (press time regularly was pushed back two to three hours during the height of the disorders), more newsroom personnel to assist with mechanics of production and more effective utilization of manpower in assembling reporting teams.

Discussion

The most significant findings of this study seem to be twofold: the newspaper's apparent excellent performance in terms of news coverage and its apparent failure to explore causes leading up to the disorders and to try to place them into a meaningful perspective. Similar results have been reported in appraisals of the commercial press' performance under similar conditions.[8] A British study echoes sentiments of several American press appraisals: "... there is a very good chance that the story will centre on violence and confrontation; that the account will be largely isolated from antecedent conditions, conveying little understanding of either root causes or aims..."[9] All of this suggests that, at least in some cases, campus press performance may simply reflect the same strengths and the same weaknesses of the commercial press. If this is so, then there would seem to be important implications for journalism education. Surely preparing journalists means more than outfitting a young recruit for a lateral movement from the campus to the commercial press. Presumably, if made aware of "good" press performance, the beginning journalist should be able to contribute toward better press performance once he enters the field.

Although data reported here come from a case study and are primarily quantitative, they are suggestive. And a proper beginning might be to encourage the student journalist to apply some of his reportorial and analytical skills to the systematic investigation of the product he helps to produce.

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[8] Notably, Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball, *Mass Media and Violence*, A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, Vol. 9 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969); "The News Media and the Disorders," in *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: A Bantam Book, 1968), pp. 362-89.

[9] James D. Halloran, Philip Elliott and Graham Murdock, *Demonstrations and Communication: A Case Study* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 315.